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MARKER PROPOSAL:
ELIZABETH HOBBS KECKLEY

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Marker proposal—Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley was born in Dinwiddie Court House, Virginia, around 1820. Documents listing her age provide birth years ranging from 1818 to 1824. Her mother was Agnes Hobbs, a slave in the household of Colonel Armistead Burwell. The man she knew as her father was George Pleasant, owned by a different master and allowed to visit his family only twice a year. Later in life, Agnes Hobbs told Keckley that her real father was actually Col. Burwell.

Col. Burwell loaned Keckley to his son, the Rev. Robert Burwell who moved to Hillsborough with his family in 1835 upon accepting the pastorate of Hillsborough Presbyterian Church. Keckley's memoir, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* records brutal treatment at the hands of Burwell a and William Bingham, "the village schoolmaster" who was a member of Burwell's church. She gives a brief and mysterious account of a four-year abusive "seduction" by another Burwell neighbor. This relationship resulted in her giving birth to a son, the only child she would have. In the book she does not mention or even allude to the identity of the white man, but after she purchased her and her son's freedom in 1855, her son, George assumed the last name of Kirkland. George Kirkland joined a Union regiment in Missouri as a white man in 1861 and was shortly killed. She would later claim on a federal pension application that in 1840 her owner, Hugh Garland at that point, performed a marriage ceremony uniting her and Alexander Kirkland. While the marriage is not likely, given that Alexander Kirkland was already married at the time, it is presumed that Kirkland was the father of her son. The marriage was presumably

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fabricated in order to make her pension application, as a "widow" with no surviving sons, more acceptable. She did, in fact, receive a pension of $8 per month, later raised to $12.

Shortly after George's birth, the old Col Burwell brought Keckley and her offspring back to Virginia, giving them to his daughter Anna, who had recently married Hugh Garland Garland moved his family to St. Louis, Missouri, seeking financial stability, but Keckley records in her book that, at the time, her sewing supported the entire household—seventeen people. Around 1852, Elizabeth married James Keckley, a slave who had misrepresented himself as a freedman. Mrs. Keckley's reputation as a seamstress grew, and, in 1855 she was able to purchase freedom for herself and her son. The $1,200 had been a gift from devoted clients, but Keckley repaid the sum with her earnings as soon as possible. In 1860, after seeing George off to college at Wilberforce University, Keckley left her alcoholic husband and moved to Washington, D.C. There she established a dressmaking business, catering to the wives of prominent politicians such as Stephen Douglas and Jefferson Davis. A favored client recommended Keckley to the wife of the newly elected president, and on March 3, 1861, Mary Todd Lincoln hired her The two women developed a close friendship (Mary Todd Lincoln once wrote in a letter to Keckley, "you are my best and kindest friend "), and Keckley even came to assist the President with his clothes and hair before public appearances.

In 1862 Elizabeth Keckley, with forty women from her Washington church, organized the Contraband Relief Association to aid black refugees. She raised money for the group through her political connections and her travels with the First family. This organization evolved into the National Association for Destitute Colored Women and Children, from whom Keckley, herself, was reduced to seeking aid in her later years

It is believed that Keckley wrote her memoirs *Behind the Scenes* with the assistance of a ghostwriter. At the time Keckley reported that she wrote the book in order to help raise money for her friend, Mrs. Lincoln, and to help neutralize harsh criticism of the former First lady. *Behind the Scenes*, which included an appendix of personal correspondence from Mary Todd Lincoln, was published in 1868. Robert Lincoln was so angered by the contents of the book that he attempted to suppress its distribution and successfully ended all contact between Keckley and his mother. The two would never meet again. Elizabeth Keckley died in Washington May 26, 1907.

The authenticity of *Behind the Scenes* has never been questioned. It has been extensively cited by Lincoln biographers (both Abraham and Mary Todd). A dress that Elizabeth Keckley created for Mrs. Lincoln is on display at the Smithsonian Institution.

Sources:

Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, 1868

Gertrude Woodruff Marlowe, "Keckley, Elizabeth Hobbs," in *American National Biography*, 1999.

Mary Claire Engstrom, "Burwell, Robert Armistead," in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, 1979.

Neil Scott, "One woman's rise from slave to Lincolns' confidante," *The Washington Times*, March 29, 1997.

**this book is expected Spring 2003—Jennifer Fleishner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly* (The spelling of Keckley varies somewhat, but the spelling with the "e" is what was used for her own publication.)

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